

A LETTER

ON

"UNCLE TOM'S CABIN."

Helks

BY

THE AUTHOR OF "FRIENDS IN COUNCIL," &c.

CAMBRIDGE:

JOHN BARTLETT.

1852.

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LETTER.

LONDON, July 9, 1852.

MY DEAR SIR:

I HAVE to offer you my thanks for sending me a very remarkable book, "Uncle Tom's Cabin," which followed on the receipt of your letter of the 25th of April last.

The book horrifies and haunts me; and I cannot help writing to you somewhat at large upon it.

You will perhaps be surprised at my saying the book horrifies me; for, from the interest you have taken in the same subjects which I have cared for, you know well what horrors of various kinds about slavery, about the dwellings of the poor, and about various sanitary matters, I must have waded through. Indeed, when I look back upon the man I was when I first left college, how devoted to the most abstract studies, and how fastidious as re-

garded every thing that was physically repulsive, I am sometimes amazed that I should have been able to go through the dense masses of recorded filth, misery, and cruelty which I have had to encounter. I think, if they could have been shown me all at once, like the tale of a life told in some magic glass, I should have shrunk out of the world in horror. But so I suppose it would be, if any one of us were to see in one condensed view the aspect and fortunes (ay, even the prosperous ones) of his future career. Well, I have somehow or other contrived to get through these horrors ; but, like many a medical man who does not become inured to the sufferings of his patients, I am still nearly as sensitive as ever ; and should, upon Goethe's principle of putting aside unnecessary excitement which tends to disturb real work, have avoided reading the book you sent me, if I had been aware of the nature of its contents. But I am glad I have read it.

Many readers and reviewers will, I have no doubt, at once explain the book to themselves, and make their minds, comparatively speaking, easy upon it, by saying that it contains gross exaggerations, and that it gives no fair account of slavery in America. I am, unfortunately, but too well acquainted with the records of slavery in most parts

of the New World, and under nations differing very much from one another, for me to be able to comfort myself in this way. In truth, unless by some special providence planters were imbued with angelic nature, of which there is at present no evidence before us, I cannot see how the state of things can be much otherwise than as it is described to be in this fearful book, which seems to have set all America again thinking about slavery. I have seen something of what is called "the world," and have a large acquaintance with men in all classes of life, from the highest to the lowest, in this country; and I think I know about *five* persons who might be intrusted with the supreme authority over their fellow-creatures which is given by law to the slaveholder, indiscriminately, in many a slave state.

It has always surprised me that any body should wish to have that power. There is a converse to every thing. Power implies responsibility; and I must say that innumerable cubic feet of collected dollars would scarcely reconcile me to the possession of supreme power over the health, wealth, education, and social duties of several hundred human beings completely committed to my charge. Very few of us are sane enough to be intrusted with such power; and, indeed, in

reference to this, I think it is very important to notice that there are throughout the world, unless your world differs very much from ours, many persons of that dubious sanity, that, although the law cannot interfere with them, they are lamentably unfit to have the management of inanimate property, much more of live property of any kind, infinitely more of intelligent human beings.

But if there be no exaggeration, or at least no such exaggeration as would seriously impair the merits of the work, as regards the condition of slaves in America, there is, I am sorry to say, an exaggeration in the statements which are made in the course of the volume, and are not contradicted, respecting the condition of the English laborer.

It is worth while to make some reply to these statements, for it is not the magnitude of an error, so much as the number of people who hold it, which renders it important and dangerous. I have no doubt there are many shrewd people in your country who say, and many shallow people in both countries who echo the saying, that there is very little substantial difference between the condition of the English laborer and that of the American slave. There is, however, even in our poorest districts and in the worst of times, all the

difference that exists between humanity and barbarism; between the dignified suffering of a man oppressed by untoward circumstances and the abject wretchedness of another driven about like a beast;—in short, between manhood and brute-hood.

I wish that such a writer as the authoress of this work could live a little time in the country in England, and really see for herself what these rustic laborers are like. She would find that, under their occasionally stolid appearance, and with their clumsy gait, there is an intelligence, a patience, an aptitude to learn, a capacity for reasonable obedience, and a general gentleness of blood and nature, which would mightily astonish her. She would even find, especially among the women, a grace and sweetness of demeanor which would remind her of the highest breeding. She is evidently perplexed to account to herself for the permission of the existence of slaves, so little do their lives appear to give room for the purposes of humanity: she would have no such doubt whatever in contemplating the life of the British peasant, or the British workman. She would see that his life fulfilled sufficiently the conditions of humanity, to render it a means of attaining to considerable self-culture, of exercising the deepest

self-restraint, of appreciating and working out what is most beautiful in the affections and the duties of a free citizen.

It is a fact easily ascertained by looking at the map, that England is an island, not a very large island, and consequently that we have not an indefinite power of settling our people upon new lands. Let those who have this power see that they use it well, and that their institutions correspond to the greatness of their resources and their felicity in that respect.

The writer of the book we are considering must not imagine that it is a general rule for the poor in England to be unconsidered, or uncared for. If she were to study this country well, she would find that, with the self-helpfulness belonging to the Anglo-Saxon race (for we too are Anglo-Saxons), individuals are making exertions in every way to benefit the poor people around them; indeed, that many persons devote the greatest part of their energies to this ever-growing task. Sometimes the poor themselves, encouraged by the example of their wealthier neighbors, form clubs and benefit societies as a resource in case of sickness. Sometimes these wealthier persons, among whom the clergyman of the parish mostly takes a prominent place, combine together to form clothing clubs,

coal clubs, and other safe means of benefiting the poor; and I must say that the rich often contrive to keep up the rate of wages in their districts; for, though we have by no means outgrown the love of money, the dollar sometimes takes the second place in our estimate of things.

Then, as to education, do not let your author-ess suppose that the poor with us are utterly uncared for in that respect. There, however, I must confess, for I love truth above all things, that personal chastisement is not wholly unknown. Our parish schoolmaster has a cane. How rarely it is used in the particular parish where I live, you may guess from the following anecdote. Mr. Emerson, who did me the honor to come and see me when he was in England, will perhaps have told you, that my house is situated on a steep hill. Looking down the hill one day last week, I was astonished to see that great functionary, the village schoolmaster, plunging down the hill at a most undignified pace; he being, as dignitaries are wont to be, somewhat portly in dimensions. Inquiring the cause of this phenomenon, I found that the good man, whose spare time is very scarce, had hurried up to get a book (we have a lending library) for one of the children who was sick and could not get it for himself. The cane, as you may imagine, is an

instrument which may pretty safely be left in the hands of such a man as this. And that cane is the only emblem of authority for miles round, — corresponding in fact with the Roman *fascēs*. To be sure, there is a policeman in the district, but he is very little heard of, and upon the occasion of the robbery of a few spoons, which occurred some years ago, that important officer, putting his hand pitiably on his breast, and telling me what he had gone through in the matter, exclaimed that he had not felt well ever since. So rare an event was such a robbery amongst us. Now, if we were in France we should have a little army of fifty or a hundred men quartered upon us ; and if we were in a slave district in America, what whippings, what imprisonments, how many overseers, would not be necessary to get the work done which we do in our quiet, noiseless, stolid way ; loving law and order and our country all the while. Do you think that, if our poor were like your slaves, they would love law and order as they do ?

Then, too, we have our workhouses for the very poor, the aged, and the infirm ; and their right to support does not depend upon the caprice of any single man. It cannot enter into the mind of any person to speculate whether it would be worth his while to use those under him well or ill.

These things are elementary, and I am ashamed to tell them to a studious and intelligent man like you ; but it is so important for nations to understand one another, that it is worth while to enter into the fullest detail about our poor people, if by so doing one could disabuse an American of the idea that the English laborer is the least like a slave, — a comparison which may help to soothe the bewildered conscience of many a man who seeks to justify slavery ; and which, I dare say, is, and has been, repeated many times in every hour of the day, by some Southern slaveholder or other.

Throughout this book, which has been the cause of my inflicting such a long letter upon you, I find the authoress again and again endeavoring to meet a set of arguments which are so thoroughly exploded in our part of the world, that, to use one of your American words, we find it difficult to “realize” them. These arguments profess to be founded on the Bible ; and no doubt it must be a charming thing, when a man is steeped all over in iniquities, to find it said by grave men with black coats and white neck-cloths, that there is no harm in any thing he has done ; but that the institution which he adores is based upon the soundest religious principles. To a man steaming

down one of your magnificent rivers with his dark cargo of slaves, it must be very cheering to hear from some benignant and judicious-looking clergyman the words, "Cursed is Canaan," and to be told that they justify what he, the slave-owner, is doing.

O the evils that spring from any misconception on any great matter! I used to wonder, when somewhat juvenile, at the unnecessary stress — unnecessary as it appeared to me — laid by Solomon upon wisdom, and to see his absolute dread of fools and folly. A little more experience has shown me that there is no wiser fear than the fear of foolishness, — a thing more terrible to meet than any wild beast of the forest. What frightful calamities, for instance, may not be directly traced up to the miserable and pedantic views which have been taken of the Bible, — views which enabled the sarcastic Gibbon to contend that the Reformation had brought in as much evil as it had removed.

Yet the simplest consideration would show that the Bible was *a* book, — *the* book, if you like, — but not *all* books; that it does not contain all history, or geology, or any other science, nor pretend to represent a perfect state of things, from which there is to be no improvement. To think this, is

to blind ourselves to all reason, philosophy, and religion. For instance, does any sacred writer intimate that the world is in a satisfactory state at the time he is writing, or that he would not alter it if he had supreme power? Was Christianity set in a world so complete in its social arrangements, that you had only to perfect them in detail, and then that all would be right? Were the political arrangements of that day perfect? What would your fellow-countrymen say to that?

But the favorers of slavery, as it exists in the United States, would reply, that, if slavery were such a bad thing, it would have been especially provided against and preached against in the Gospel. So you might say of absolute political power. The absolute political power of Nero and of Commodus, of Attila and of Genghis Khan, produced, no doubt, horrible results; but there is nothing that I know of in the Scriptures particularly directed against despots, and there has always been a great deal brought forward in their favor out of these very Scriptures by flattering, glozing, learned men.

Such views are far from being derogatory to the Bible. Comparatively slight would be the good of Christianity, if it could have been stereotyped in the way that some men's fancies would have had it, embracing a complete code, not only

of moral, but of social and political laws. All such codes are mortal. All systems are mortal.

I no sooner see any of them arise, as may be seen in every age, than I say to myself, "That means something, perhaps: it suits this people, this age, this country; it will have its day; but it provides and settles too much, and there will be an end of it."

I contend, moreover, that modern slavery is essentially different from the slavery of old times. If you will look at what I have said elsewhere on this subject,* you will see that Jewish slavery differed *toto cælo*, in fact was whole heavens and whole hells apart, from any thing like modern slavery.

As for slavery among barbarians or in the Roman Empire, the difference between that and any thing like yours is immense, much greater than you are likely to have any notion of until you have looked carefully into the question.

The rare liberality of the Romans, which could endure most gods, was also very noticeable in its tolerance of all races of mankind; and it would be comparatively needless to be for ever dinning

* Friends in Council; Vol. II.

this dreary subject of slavery into the ears of mankind, if your slaves in America but enjoyed the hopes, the kind treatment, and the privileges, which the same class enjoyed amongst the Romans under their best emperors. But when once the evils of slavery are deepened and darkened by the difference of race, then comes the utmost cruelty of which human nature is capable : where all remorse is anticipated or destroyed by disgust.

But to pass to other considerations which do not require learning or thought, let us simply go back in imagination to the time of Christ's coming upon earth, and for a moment bring before him in our fancy such transactions in slavery as may be seen now, which are indeed daily occurrences, mere matters of business, in your country.

Now imagine him in the Temple, looking on at the sale of a young child, about to be taken from its mother's breast ; and conceive what he would have said of that traffic. Picture him coming into any market, like yours in the South, and seeing the sale of beautiful quadroons ; or, for one hour, watching such exorbitant cruelty as that perpetrated upon the slaves in many plantations. Would any of your clergy, those who now justify this institution, like to have been there ? Why, the terror and horror of the evil-doers (ay, and

of the abettors too), their minds being once opened by divine power to the iniquity of such proceedings, would have been an agony dreadful to behold. No, let your defenders of slavery say that those whose cause they advocate will have their institution maintained just as it is, that they will fight for it, die for it, and, in truth, that nothing will induce them to give up their property. But do not let them put their case as one to be argued religiously; for the religions of nearly all nations will condemn them. American slavery will find no substantial countenance from Vedas, Korans, Bibles, or any other religious book which has been believed by any large number of civilized or enlightened people, and which has had the seal set upon its moral merits by the common sense of great bodies of mankind.

But you will say, "What does all this lead to, my good friend? You have maintained that the evils of slavery are not exaggerated in this book, that American slavery is not justified by the Bible, and that the English laborer bears no resemblance whatever to the American slave. But what is to be the result, what am I to do in the matter, what are others to do in it?" To this I reply, as I have often replied before to similar questions, it is im-

possible for one person to lay down the exact wheel-track of duty for another. No lawyer, no man of business, could give advice in the way that writers are often expected to do; that is, to give advice in detail without having the details before them. For instance, in this case of slavery, what a man should do in one slave state may be very different from what he should do in another. Nothing is more unwise than a pedantic application of one particular theory or system to various sets of circumstances. Let any man in America say how he is surrounded in this matter, what he already thinks of it, and what manner of man he is (for that is most important), and I might "hazard a wide solution," to use Sir Thomas Browne's phrase, as to what a man so situated might most advisedly attempt.

So much for minute or detailed advice,—but there are certain general remarks which may be useful. In the first place, you must really try not to be disheartened at the magnitude of the evil. You must not suppose that you gentlemen in America are the only people who have great difficulties to contend with. With us there is want of space, and perhaps, too, want of knowledge how to use what space we have. We are crippled by laws and practices in reference to law, which

I fondly trust are not equalled in absurdity, not only in any part of this planet, but in any other planet that circles round the sun : the history of many a great law case is a thing which, if really well written, would convulse the world with tears and laughter. In many of our ways and habits we are so constrained by the most thoughtless conformity with the past, that the nation is like a tall boy of poor parents who is painfully tight in his clothes. Then, in any great question submitted to the public here, religion, or rather religious rancor, springs up like the vines which, at the will of Bacchus, rose suddenly from the earth and entangled the feet of some poor mythical person — whose name I now forget, but you, as being later from a university, will know all about him. Again, we, as well as you, have constitutional difficulties to contend with. Before any thing wise or good can be done, innumerable people have to be persuaded, or outvoted, or tired out. All the possible folly that can be said on any subject has to be answered, and borne with, and exhausted. The chaff has to be winnowed away many times before the grain can be got at at all. One conclusion from all this in my mind is, that, as more power of all kinds is allowed to the individual in modern constitutions (as for in-

stance he has more power of obstruction), more is demanded from him in the way of individual thought and exertion for the public good.

At the same time, do not think I underrate the causes for occasional despondency. I know how disheartening it is, and how, to use the expression of a favorite old author of mine, it sends one "down to the abysses," to find, after long toil at any matter, where some result of obvious public utility has been proved to be attainable, and even the mode of attaining it shown, that, notwithstanding this, little or no progress seems to be made, and the most contemptible interruptions of great public measures take place by reason of the meanest hindrances.

I am sure that many a man must have felt, as I confess I have, struck down to the earth for the moment by a vast and indefinite despair, at seeing how little is done, compared with what might be done, in the great sanitary reforms that are needed in this country, and, indeed, in most countries; and then, on the other hand, to see the noble way in which smoke, filth, putridity, and miasma stand their ground against the convinced, but not judiciously united, intelligence of mankind. Governments succeed each other, displaying various degrees of apparently resolute incompetency on

some of the most important matters, and such as are clearly within their functions, — and within theirs only. You almost seem to think that it is the business of men in office to hinder; but, poor fellows! that would be a very hard construction to put upon their conduct. As the present Lord Grey once observed, when you find a number of people, one after the other, running into the same error, you must look aside from the men to the peculiar circumstances which they have all had to embarrass them. A difficult mill to grind with is a popular assembly, — a popular assembly, too, open to the press, and with a pretty nearly unlimited power of talking. Moreover, the total indifference shown in both our nations to the adoption of any methods of securing a supply of intelligent men to direct our affairs, greatly puts it out of our power to blame with justice those statesmen we have, who are obtained in such a haphazard fashion.

We are now just going to a general election. If the motives which will determine this election could be laid before any superior being, I fear the whole thing would prove in his eyes a disgrace to humanity. Here a triumphant appeal will be made to the narrowest bigotry, there to the lowest self-interest; in this place, to the power of the

purse ; in that place, to the power of local influence and the densest rural stupidity. An assembly thus collected will not be enlightened by any men brought into it from other sources ; though it is the wish, I will venture to say, of the most thoughtful men in this country, and those who have studied government most deeply, that some few members at least should be chosen by the Crown or the Ministry, whose only or whose chief recommendation should be their capacity for the conduct of affairs.

Notwithstanding all these difficulties, you must allow we still work on ; and, being a really great people at heart (I may say such a thing between ourselves, for we are your kindred), we silently endure what must be endured, are contented with small gains, and patiently strive upwards to the light.

But do not suppose that we have not our difficulties as well as you have yours.

To come, however, closer to the question before us, I would venture to say that there is an ample field of exertion for any one in America, who cares about this subject of slavery. Let right feelings about it pervade your literature. Argue the question well : answer the arguments said to be drawn from the Bible. If you are a slave-

owner, give every facility for the education of slaves, and for their gradual manumission. Try to make different classes of slaves (what I mean is, not to keep them all to the same functions), for that will make freedom easier to be given, and better used when it does come. Perhaps all these efforts will not settle the question. A great crash will come some day to do that. Such is the way even with us, who are a much older nation than you are: we never work out any thing gradually and patiently. A Reform Bill, an Abolition of Corn Laws, or a Catholic Emancipation, always comes on a sudden, and is carried through with all the want of wisdom which there is in undue haste. If nobody, however, had thought and talked and written about these great changes, they would have come still more abruptly than they did.

But to return to the slave-owner. For my own part I cannot imagine a more splendid career, intellectually speaking, than that of a slave-owner in a slave state who is thoroughly awakened to the difficulty of his position. In a minor way Irish land-owners have had, of late years, a similar trial; and several of them have come nobly out of it. This slave-owner will certainly have difficulty enough before him, — with his own early prejudices to contend against, — jealous neighbors to

appease, — harsh state laws to obey, and, while obeying, to modify, — a degraded race to elevate, — and all this to be accomplished without the encouragement of his fellows in private society or at public meetings. These are indeed labors worthy of Hercules: but difficulties are the things that make life tolerable to many of us; and it cannot be said that we are left without plenty of them.

Your authoress is evidently vexed by the questions mankind are always knocking their heads against, — the origin of evil and the endurance of evil. Certainly, the faith in a beneficent Creator is sorely tried by what is daily to be seen in slave states; but I have always thought the uninterrupted and peaceful voyage of a slave-ship — some “Santa Trinidad,” or “Maria de la Gloria” — the most wonderful problem in the whole world. On it goes, a thing beautifully constructed for its purpose, — hundreds of human beings packed in indescribable agony within it; the porpoises gambol around it; light breezes fan its sails; the water parts lovingly from its well-shaped bows, like the best affection of true-hearted women, “which clings not, nor is exigent”: in truth, the powers of nature, sublimely indifferent to right or wrong, Epicurean

divinities in their way, refuse no aid to this dark, devilish thing as it skims gracefully over the waters; and, if it escapes our cruisers, the "Santa Trinidad" lands half or two thirds of its original live cargo, and is considered to have done a good stroke of business. Truly, the apparent silence of God is the most awful thing the sun looks down upon.

It is somewhere said that "evil is good in the making": this is a brave and noble saying; it were to be wished, however, that our part of the process were a little better understood and less dilatory. At the same time, it must be admitted that a good deal of nonsense is thought and talked about this question of evil; and we sometimes seem to want a sugared kind of universal beneficence and happiness which really and truly may be a very low form of either.

How supremely dull, for instance, a perfectly well-governed state would be. On the other hand, how exquisitely humorous, though very sad withal, is the present condition of things. You see rabid attempts at freedom result in twisting the chains more closely and painfully around the shouters for freedom. You see the effort to bring more and more assured wisdom and virtue, under the shape of popular opinion, into the administration of af-

fairs, result occasionally in reducing constitutional governments to a dead lock in all the most useful purposes of government. Then, look at the men in power. I believe we British have been quite as well governed as we deserved, perhaps better; but we sometimes have men in high authority amongst us, perhaps even as cabinet ministers, to whom no prudent private person would give six-and-twenty shillings a week for any thing they could do. This is very humorous, possibly a shade too comic, when you think what a vast nation this is, flowing over with unused men of great ability. But life is full of such deep drollery.

Look at the way men rise to honor. You see a person whom Nature meant to be industriously obscure; and yet such a man will become the founder of a family; and his children will bear titles, and enjoy substantial power as long as the kingdom lasts. If you ask what were this man's public deserts, it is a matter which a few persons, well informed in political affairs, might be able to explain to you; but for the great mass of mankind it is perfectly unintelligible. They never heard of the man's name, or gave the least heed to it, before they hear of his ennoblement. This, too, is humorous.

Do not pretend, however, because you have no

system of hereditary honors, that what honors you have are bestowed much more wisely than ours. For I should beg leave to doubt that.

Nor, again, is it in government alone that the drollery I have spoken of before is visible. Success in ordinary life often depends as much upon defects and redundancies as upon merits. There are even instances of men who succeed in life by the fear and aversion of their fellow-men; and these disagreeable persons are got rid of by being pushed up higher and higher in consequence of the very qualities which their good parents always labored to correct in them. In the mean time, persons of real worth are too much prized by those around them to be advanced. Thoughtful men have often fretted over-much, as it seems to me, about such things; for, putting aside higher views, without these motley occurrences in life, where would be its tragedy, or its comedy, or its tragic-comedy, all so deeply interesting and so instructive?

Well, what I wanted to come to is, that, if the systems of perfect good which men often propose to themselves in their fond imaginations were adopted, all wit, humor, contrast, forbearance in the highest sense, bravery, and independence would run some chance of being done away with. This may be a sufficient answer to any weak repinings

about the moderate evils and anomalies which I have been alluding to. But in the proceedings in slavery there is an excess of evil which really tends to overcome piety, and which all good men should combine against, if it were only to check the murmuring, probably very unwise, but very natural, which will arise with the first thoughts of most men when contemplating such horrors. If we are left alone here on the earth, to do almost what we please with each other, the very awfulness of the situation should breed in men's hearts a profound responsibility. With one voice, spreading round the world like an electric message, mankind should say, "There are things which clearly we are not to do. It cannot be right to sell away an infant from its mother. This must be put a stop to at all hazards. Here is an evil so large and trenchant, that the subtlest casuist would be puzzled to explain it away into beneficence. Let us clear away this doubt of the very destinies of man which springs from the permission only of such monstrosities."

I have now said all I have to say, and more than I ought to ask you to read, about "Uncle Tom's Cabin." If I had the honor of any acquaintance with the authoress, I would send through you my best regards and most earnest

expressions of encouragement to her. She is evidently a noble woman and an excellent writer. And her book is one of those which insist upon being read when once begun.

You are very good to tell me that I need not reply to your letters; and I should probably have relied upon this goodness, but I could not keep silent after reading that book. Else, in general, I must say these regular correspondences between friends are rather a mistake. Indeed, I have a theory of my own about them, which I will impart to you; namely, that one begins with a certain definite amount of regard and affection for a person, of which one gradually writes off small portions as one writes each enforced letter to him or her, till at last, though the beginnings and endings grow more intimate and affectionate, the original affection has wasted away.

My little boy, after writing a letter to a playmate the other day (and you know what work of legs and arms and tongue children make of writing), threw the pen down with some impatience, and exclaimed, "When I grow up I shall write no more letters!" Ah, my little master, thought I, when you come to that age of joy and freedom, as you suppose it, which you call "growing up," you will know some things you

don't know now; and, amongst them, will appreciate this endless punishment of letter-writing. Often I think what a jovial thing it must have been to have been as ignorant as a baron in the Middle Ages, and to have been capable of nothing but a rude cross in the way of signature.

Such an avowal as the above is rather inconsistent with the length of this letter; but we human beings from our weakness have at least the privilege of being inconsistent sometimes. However, I must not linger any more with you; but must now turn to labors which I am rather weary of, but which I work on at, not without the hope that they may be of some use in showing the difficulties which former nations have experienced in this subject of slavery, and the splendid efforts made by good men of other days to overcome these difficulties.

Live and prosper. In all your writings, try to make your people think as kindly of us as you can. The seriousness of these times forbids those small-town disputes, and that miserable interchange of snarlings, which have hitherto so often existed between two great and closely related nations.

I remain

Ever sincerely yours.

